



7-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Volohonsky, H. (1999). Volohonsky, H. (1999). Is the color of that horse really pale? *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 18(2), 167–168.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 18 (2). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol18/iss2/10>



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Is the Color of That Horse Really Pale?

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The Greek adjective in the passage of St. John's Revelation describing the Fourth Rider and his horse does not have, in this context, the meaning of color. This is demonstrated while comparing the Revelation text with the book of the prophet Zechariah.

WE DISCUSS here the color of the Fourth Rider's horse, which appears in St. John's Revelation: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him" (Rev. 6:8). The same color (pale) appears in all translations of the Greek text. This image—a horrible rider on the "pale" horse—was widely exploited by poets and artists. Some of them presented a skeleton with a scythe on a pale scraggy jade horse. Even theologians drew from this color many profound conclusions in connection with the nature of death, its semitransparency, phosphorescence of bones, and so on.

Still the question arises: Is that horse really pale? The color looks rather strange anyway.

Let us turn to the interlinear translation of the Greek text:

And I saw, and behold, horse a pale green (χλωρος), and the one sitting upon it, name to him death... (*Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, 1958, p. 974)

The basic meaning of the word χλωρος is "green." But the rider on a green stallion is a peculiar if not even a funny creature. In rationalising the Holy Text, translators chose the less expressive meaning, "pale green" or simply "pale," that is, still the color, and their version was generally accepted. But is it true? Does the word χλωρος here mean a color?

The closest similarity to the apocalyptic scene appears in the book of the prophet Zechariah (Zech. 6:2–6, *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*, 1985, pp. 568–569): "The first chariot had red horses, the second chariot had black horses, the third chariot had white horses and the fourth chariot had vigorous piebald horses." The Hebrew words here are בִּרְדִּים אֲמֻצִּים (brudim amutsim), or "dappled powerful" in English, that is, two epithets, one for color

and another describing racing qualities of a horse. It is explained that these horses are “four of spirits of the heavens” (ibid.), that is, winds, and have some relation to the angels of space directions which stand “before the Lord of the whole world” (ibid.).

Three colors of the horses—white, red, and black—coincide in St. John’s Revelation (Rev. 6: 2–8) and in the book of Zechariah. The fourth epithet is *χλωρος* in Revelation and “brudim amutsim” in the book of Zechariah. But the word *χλωρος* may not only mean a color. It can relate to the horse’s racing qualities as well, standing for such phenomena as strength, freshness, vigour, ardency, and so on. In this sense, it coincides with the meaning of the Hebrew word *אַמּוּטִים* (amutsim). And the second Hebrew word, the color *בְּרִדִּים* (brudim), was simply lost when the terminology of the prophet Zechariah was adjusted to the events of Revelation.

With this small correction of the fourth horse’s color, the fragment of the apocalyptic vision may be described as follows (ibid., 6:1–8): The first seal on the book in the hands of God is opened and there appears the first angel, with a bow, who is sitting on a white horse. His horse is the wind of eastern direction. After opening the second and the third seals, there appear two angels, with a sword, and with a balance. The second angel is riding on a red horse (the wind from the west). The third angel is on a black horse (the wind of the northern direction). Then the fourth seal is opened and there appears the fourth angel, Death, or better to say, Plague. He is mounted on a dappled, vigorous (or ardent, *χλωρος*) horse and goes to the south. These four angels obtain “the power over the fourth part of the earth,” that is, each one for one-fourth, “to kill with sword (the second angel), and with hunger (or famine, the third angel), and with plague (the fourth angel), and with the beasts of the earth” (apparently, the first angel) (ibid., 6:8).

One should not make a drawing of the Fourth Rider in a medieval or renaissance style as a skeleton. He looks rather like a Bedouin dressed in black, on a dappled horse, and a lance is probably his weapon.

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